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THE LANGUAGE OF PRIMITIVE MAN.

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It is proposed, in this article, to consider the following question: Whether the theory maintained by many writers upon Comparative Philology as to the origin of language, either necessitates or warrants the theory so many of them hold as to the origin of religion. The view commonly proposed by them as to the first branch of this general question is succinctly stated by Mr. Charles Francis Keary, of the British Museum, in his work on "Outlines of Primitive Belief." "Philologists," he says, "may continue long to dispute on the precise origin of language; but Philology has brought us so far that there can be now no question that the primitive speech of mankind was of the rudest character, devoid almost utterly of abstract words, unfit for the use of any kind of men save such as were in the earliest stage of thought." All words, he claims, expressive of abstract ideas, "had their physical antecedents;" originating in sensation and in observation, and passing over, in process of time, to higher meanings. "To speak more plainly," he says, "such ideas as *horse, tree, wolf, run, flow, river*, must have been the first to receive names. * * * But inward ideas—*anxiety, love, thought*,—would receive their names later, and by a metaphorical transfer of the words from physical to meta-physical ideas." To show how out of such "ideas" religion grew, he observes further on: "As surely as *love, hate, right* and *wrong* have had their physical antecedents, and as surely as these sensations have developed in time into thoughts and feelings, so surely have the outward things,

as the mere rocks and trees, which were themselves objects of worship, grown in time to be abstract gods, or to be One abstract God."

By this theory man, having originally, however acquired, the faculty of speech, began to exercise it first by naming the objects around him in the physical world, next by giving names to acts, sensations, and occurrences in his own outer life; then, in some unconscious use of metaphor in the employment of such words, grew to express the thoughts and ideas of which he became conscious in the process of his intellectual development. In due time sensations of wonder and worship began to move within him, centering first on natural objects adapted in their nature to excite such sensations, from which it was an easy step to the conception of invisible powers, and finally of one great, all-ruling Power, the "One abstract God." The point now in hand is, whether all that is essential to so much of this theory as relates to the origin of language might not be conceded, should the evidence so require, and still leave undisturbed all those other evidences by which belief in the origin of religion through a divine revelation is sustained.

What I have to say upon this point I prefer to put in the form of suggestion, as to what may seem entirely fair inferences from so much of the history of primitive man as is given us in the first four chapters of Genesis. I put these observations in the form of suggestion, rather than of positive statement, not because the interpretations indicated conflict in the least with the customary ones, but because they seem to find in the narrative somewhat *more* than has commonly been sought there.

I. THE NAMING OF THE ANIMALS.

The first of these suggestions is that of a possible indication in one part of the narrative of the manner in which Adam himself learned to employ his faculty of speech. I take the passage (Gen. II. 19, 20) as translated by Lenormant: "And Yahveh Elohim formed out of earth all the animals of the field and all the fowls of the air, *and he led them to the man to see how he would name them*; and according as the man should name a living being, such should be its name. And the man called by name all cattle, all fowl of the air and all wild beasts of the fields; but for the man he did not find a help fitting for him." Now, it is quite customary with interpreters to explain the concluding words of this passage: "But for the man he did not find a help fitting for him," as indicating the chief divine motive in bringing the animals

thus to the man. For example, Dr. Robert Jamieson, of Glasgow, says: "Thus did the all-wise Creator, when about to provide an help meet for the first man, cause him to go through a course of simple but important training, by which he was not only made sensible of the privation under which, as a social being, he labored, but also qualified to appreciate the magnitude of the boon about to be conferred on him by the creation of woman, as well as prepared to communicate his thoughts and feelings to her through the medium of articulate language." In this explanation the purpose first named is so dwelt upon as nearly to put out of sight altogether the second one, implied in the concluding words of the comment. It may be that the order of precedence should be reversed. The paramount thing in the Genesis narrative, as quoted, is certainly the *naming* of the animals. It was that he might name them that they were brought to the man. What is subsequently said implies that as he thus grew familiar with the life around him Adam became conscious how much *alone* he himself was. Every other living being had its mate; for himself "the man did not find a help fitting for him." The two meanings are doubtless in the passage, but that which seems especially to invite consideration is the distinct indication as to the method which God employed in teaching man to use that faculty of *speech* with which he had endowed him. The "*bringing*" of the animals is, perhaps, not to be taken too literally. It may simply be the form of expression used to denote rather a *process* than a distinct and definite *act*.

For to any proper conception of the divine procedure in giving a language to mankind, it is not necessary to suppose that such a language was given them ready-made. Upon the contrary, all that we observe of the divine method in dealing with mankind suggests that God would teach man to speak, by putting him in the way of making and using a language for himself. The direct divine gift would be in the *faculty* of language. Why should we suppose that the use of this faculty began under conditions essentially different from those which accompany and guide the use of all our faculties? If we may take the passage in this way, we have then in the words quoted a distinct indication as to the manner in which human language originated; an indication, too, perfectly consistent with what philology itself claims. It began in the *naming* of the various objects which man saw around him; that which, in the strictly scientific view is the only form in which a language *could* begin.

II. THE EDEN SYMBOLS.

Each of these points must be touched briefly, and so I pass to another. It is claimed that primitive man could not have been possessed of abstract ideas, or of the power of expressing such. Now, it is remarkable that nowhere in the whole account in Genesis, as concerns the first man, is there any implication whatever that man in his original state was capable of such ideas, or that he had words in which to express them. The indications are all to an entirely contrary effect.

One of the earliest lessons important for the human being to learn, was that of the nature of those distinctions upon which the whole moral trial of humanity in this world was to rest. Those hostile to belief in a divine revelation, and so of anything more than at best mere allegory, in this Genesis account of the first man, deride the idea that the partaking or non-partaking of a certain kind of fruit could have been a matter of such moment as to carry with it all the consequences that are traced to it. Yet it is exactly in this feature of the divine procedure with Adam, that we find the narrative coming into consistency with what science claims must have been the condition of primitive man. He was incapable, it is said, of clearly shaping abstract ideas, or of expressing them in words. Indeed, the language for such expression would be necessary to clearness and distinctness of conception. All this had to be a *growth*; a growth beginning in ideas brought home to him through his observation of external things, these ideas serving him as steps upward to what concerned his higher nature and higher life. Now, it is remarkable that, according to the narrative, this was precisely the divine method with man. The conveyance to him of a moral law, in the terms of a formal precept, was in the circumstances impossible. He had no word for the idea of obedience, or that of disobedience. But he could understand a permission or a prohibition set before him in the form of a visible and tangible object, representative of *an act*. Hence the word spoken to him: "Of every tree in the garden thou mayst eat, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat, for on the day thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die of death." (I use again Lenormant's translation.)

Whether the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, each, had in them some miraculous property suited to the purpose indicated by its name, may or may not have been the case.

If any object to the supposition as "unscientific," then we will say that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil stood in the garden as the *symbol* of man's moral trial, resting on this knowledge, and of the distinction of good and evil implied; and hence its name. In any case, it is clear that by this method it pleased God, exactly as science supposes in the case of a primitive man in whom what most distinguishes man as man existed rather as *germs* and *possibilities* than as developed powers, to bring to the apprehension of this being he had made the great idea of law, and obligation, of obedience or disobedience, of permission and prohibition, of reward and penalty—in the form of a visible and tangible *object*—an object-lesson, if any so choose to term it,—and in this way to begin man's moral and intellectual education. How consistent this is with what science insists upon in such a case, may be illustrated by imagining that the account in Genesis had been, in any measure, like that of Milton in "Paradise Lost." How the poet makes Adam capable of the profoundest reasoning upon metaphysical and theological themes, and puts into his mouth terms representative of abstract ideas which were hardly familiar ones even in Milton's own time, is well known to every reader of the poem. Anything approaching this in the Genesis narrative would, undoubtedly, supply the hostile critic with a dangerous weapon. But read the account as it stands, and how is it possible for science to even cavil, as to the precise point now in question?

It may possibly be said that it is inconceivable that such tremendous consequences to a whole race of human beings should by a perfect moral ruler be made to turn upon the act of a being like this primitive man, done under the circumstances supposed. But I am not aware that the Scripture any where teaches that upon this one act of disobedience, simply as *an act*, standing by itself, all those consequences *did* turn. It was not the partaking of the fruit, but the *disobedience*; and the disobedience, itself, not as a mere act, but as the first step out of the way of right, sure to be followed by others, with endless depraving, and hence ruinous, results. The words, "thou shalt die of death," are not the mere utterance of arbitrary penalty; they announce consequences sure to follow, and which not even God could prevent, unless it had suited his purpose in the creation of man to make him a being to whom moral trial should be a thing impossible.

III. THE COLLOQUY WITH CAIN.

In the colloquy of Jehovah with Cain only two words occur which can properly be called abstract terms, and these are illustratively so accompanied as to lose very much of the abstract quality. These two words are "sin" and "punishment"—the latter being "crime" in Lenormant's translation, and "iniquity," in that of Conant. The use of the former of these words is, in its connection, quite remarkable. Jehovah says to Cain: "When thou hast done well dost thou not lift it up [thy countenance']? And in that thou hast not done well, sin lies in ambush at thy door, and its appetite is turned toward thee; but thou, rule over it." Sin is here a wild beast, and in the form of that vivid object-lesson it is represented to Cain. When Cain says, after the deed of murder is done, and the doom of the murderer is declared, "My crime is too great for me to carry the weight of it," whatever abstract quality may be in the word "crime" is nearly lost in the manner of its conception. There is no indication that Cain laments his crime *as a crime*; rather it is as a *burden* whose "weight" he dreads. Physical experiences of this nature have quite as much to do with the idea he has of his own guilt and its consequences, probably much more, than any conception of the moral quality of his act in killing his brother.

Then the method Jehovah uses in bringing his crime clearly before his consciousness, and the language of Cain himself are equally to our present point. "Where is Abel, thy brother?" God asks. "Is it my business," the sullen criminal replies, "to look after my brother, as he himself keeps one of his own flock? Am I my brother's keeper?" Mark, then, what the Divine Voice says to him: "What hast thou done?" A deed which has not yet even a name. "The voice of thy brother's blood cries toward me from the soil." Cain had seen that blood, which ought to have been so sacred to him, sink into the soil. How vividly is his fearful guilt brought home to him as God gives it thus a voice of accusation! Could science represent to us the scene more in perfect consistence with its own theory as to primitive man?

The penalty visited upon Cain is in a like manner significant. There is a difference among translators as to whether we shall render "Jehovah gave a sign to Cain," or "placed a mark on Cain." The latter is Lenormant's rendering. It does not much matter, to my present purpose, which of these be taken. The essential fact is that the divine wisdom did not appoint to this first murderer that penalty which, later, was ordained for all such as he. Cain is made the monument of his

own crime: "a fugitive and a vagabond," whom even "the soil of the earth" which had drank his brother's blood would curse, and protected against the violence which he had visited upon pious Abel, only by a divine interposition. In what other way could the growing families of earth be so impressed with the hatefulness of such deeds as this which Cain had done, and in what way could he himself be so deeply punished? The time had not yet come for the formulation of law; nor for expressing in the form of principle and precept what belongs to all human relations. Even the declaration, "each one of you *is* his brother's keeper," could not yet be comprehended with the breadth of meaning such words now have. But whoever looked upon Cain, an oak splintered by the lightning of Jehovah's just wrath, a marked and branded man, against whom even "the soil of the earth" uttered its testimony, *knew* that God abhors murder and will surely punish it.

IV. THE SONG OF LAMECH.

The limits of this paper will allow of but one example more. By common consent what is called the song of Lamech is the oldest poetical production, if we may so term it, now extant. Conant's translation of it is as follows:

"Adah and Zillah, hear my voice,
Wives of Lamech, give ear to my word.
For I have slain a man for my wound,
And a young man for my hurt.
For sevenfold should Cain be avenged:
And Lamech seventy and seven."

Lenormant's runs thus:

"Adah and Zillah listen to my voice!
Wives of Lemek give heed to my word!
For I have killed a man for my wound,
And a child for my bruise.
After the same manner as Quain shall be avenged seven times,
Lemek shall be seventy-seven times."

It would seem that now, after the lapse of something like a hundred years since the murder of Abel, the meaning of the divine fiat in regard to Cain had come to be misunderstood, or at least, by those who had an interest in so doing, misinterpreted. Lamech, one of his descendants, chooses to view him as a man heroically taking vengeance for a personal injury, and justified in so doing. He himself, a worthy offspring of the first murderer, and an equally worthy progenitor of those who were soon to "fill the earth with violence," in a like bloody manner avenges himself for the "bruise" he has received. These lines are his boastful song of triumph, addressed to his wives, as if sure of

their admiration. They are called poetry on account of their parallelisms, and the form of the expression; yet to us of this age they certainly seem not very highly poetical. All the more significant for us are they, for this very reason. While they show how rapidly that seed of evil which "man's first disobedience" had planted in the world was coming to the harvest, they also illustrate the fact that man was still the primitive man, his range of ideas limited, his power of expression equally so. Why do not the scientists themselves fix upon this very song of Lamech as proving what they claim, that "the primitive speech of mankind was of the rudest character, devoid almost utterly of abstract words, unfit for the use of any kind of men save such as were in the earliest stages of thought?"

It is possible that interpretations and inferences such as are here suggested may require some modification of the views commonly held concerning primitive man, among believers in the Bible as an inspired book. But is it not also quite likely that many of these views have been taken fully as much from the poem of Milton as from the history as written by Moses? It is not the Adam of "Paradise Lost," but the Adam of Genesis whom we must try to conceive of in a right way. Nor do we imagine it to be necessary to Christian doctrine in any phase of it, that we should view the first man as gifted with faculties and attainments already mature. He was not the semi-brute of the materialists, but neither was he the wonderfully gifted and expert being Milton has made him seem to us. He was enriched with faculties and potencies in which was foreshadowed the whole career of humanity; he was made capable of learning, in the ways God chose for teaching him, those things which imply all obligation and all destiny; he had the royal gift of intelligence and the royal prerogative of moral freedom; to him it was given to "name" all terrestrial things and all living beings on the earth, and to be creation's voice in all the marvels of speech and all high testimonies of praise to the Creator;—but *he began at the beginning*. In this light inspiration itself pictures him for us; and when "science" imagines that in declaring his condition as a primitive man it declares some new thing, it is just carried away by another of its many delusions.